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THE FABLE *FROSCH UND MAUS* AS FOUND IN
LUTHER AND HANS SACHS

On April 23, 1530 Kurfürst Johann of Saxony went to the Augsburg Reichstag. He would have been glad of Luther's presence there but did not venture to bring him over the borders of his own territory. That he might still be in the neighborhood however, he gave him as a residence his castle at Koburg. With characteristic diligence Luther planned to make use of this time for literary production. In a letter to Melanchthon he explains his project of erecting here three tabernacles "*Psalterio unum, Prophetis unum et Aesopo unum.*"¹ Twice again in his letters from Koburg to Melanchthon on May 12 and to Wenzel Link on May 28 he mentions his projects.² From these references it can be safely assumed that the small collection of Luther's fables dates from his residence in Koburg, that is, between the dates of April 23 and October 5, 1530. Unfortunately his plan to make a complete collection of Aesop's fables was not destined to be carried out. His intimate friend and ardent champion, Johann Mathesius, refers to the writing of the 16 fables "*mit einer sehr gelerten Vorrede.*" In reality there were only 13 fables, Mathesius's error here resting on a mistake in numbering that was also carried over into the printed editions.³

Luther's purpose in preparing this collection is plainly expressed in his introduction which was probably written at the same time as his fables. After explaining the value of fables as a means of instructing youth in an agreeable way he adds with regret in speaking of the fables then available "*Darüber so schendliche unzüchtige Bubenstück darein gemischt, das kein züchtig, from Mensch leiden, zuuor kein jung Mensch, one schaden lesen oder hören kan. . . . Darumb so bitten wir alle frome Herten, wollen denselben Deutschen schendlichen Esopum ausrotten, und diesen an sein stat gebrauchen.*"⁴ His purpose in the work then, was to purify

¹ Enders, *Luthers Briefwechsel* VII p. 302.

² Enders, *Luthers Briefwechsel* VII pp. 332 and 346.

³ For a scholarly treatment of the subject, see E. Thiele, "*Luthers Fabeln*" *Neudrucke Literaturwerke des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*. No. 76.

⁴ Thiele, *Luthers Fabeln*, p. 20.

this branch of literature and make it again one which could really offer moral instruction. He had always recognized the value of thus coating a wholesome moral pill of reality with the sugar of unreality and employed this method on various occasions, in sermons, conversations, letters and as a means of instructing his own son.

In now turning directly to the fables of Aesop he was treating a material well-known to the reading world of his time. Various ones of the fables ascribed to Aesop had been appearing in the German literature of the Middle Ages since the time of Charlemagne. But however well-known individual stories may have been they were accessible to German readers as a complete collection in only one form, namely the translation by Heinrich Steinhöwel, printed in Ulm between 1476 and 1480.⁵ It was this collection that had aroused the violent disapproval of the reformer and it was his wish now to produce a purified form of these immortal stories.

The work of Steinhöwel is in fact a curious mixture. The first part of the book presents the mythical biography of Aesop, which Maximus Planudes is said to have brought to Italy from Constantinople about 1327. The main part of this collection consists of the so-called fables of Romulus, a Latin paraphrase of Phaedrus, dating from the tenth century, 80 fables in four books. This is the basis of later collections of the so-called fables of Aesop and to this Luther refers when he speaks in praise of Aesop's fables. As an appendix, Steinhöwel added 17 stories designated as *Extravaganzen*, mostly animal fables, a selection of 27 fables of Avian, 16 parables from the "*Disciplina Clericalis*" of Petrus Alfonsus, and finally 6 stories taken from the "*Facetiae*" of Poggio. Such was the parti-colored volume known to the Germany of Luther as Aesop. But it was especially against the appendix that Luther's moral gorge rose. The tales of Alfonsus and above all of Poggio seemed to him by no means an appropriate medium for the conveying of moral truths.

Even before Luther was thus occupying some of his spare moments in the castle at Koburg with the remoulding of

⁵ *Bibliothek des literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart*. Vol. 117. Ed. by H. Oesterley, 1873.

Aesop another German writer was attempting the same task. His plan was not expressed in such comprehensive terms but the quantity of his output in this field assumed far larger proportions than Luther's. His circle of influence and readers was infinitely smaller, but he was an ardent adherent of his great contemporary and known to him favorably as the author of the "Wittenbergisch Nachtigall", an inspiring poem announcing to Germany the dawn of the Reformation and assuring fame to its author, Hans Sachs.

Aesop as a source first occupied the attention of Sachs in 1520 when he used the material of the fable "Frosch und Maus"⁶ as the basis of a mastersong. Up to and including the year 1530, when Luther's fables were written Sachs had treated six fables of Aesop in his mastersongs and one in his collection of Schwänke.

It is of interest to examine one of these more closely as showing a possible literary connection between Luther and Sachs. This is the fable mentioned above, "Frosch und Maus." It is the third one in Luther's collection and seems to have been a favorite one with Sachs as he treated it three times in metrical form, first as a mastersong in 1520, then as a Schwank May 1, 1528 and finally as a mastersong again November 10, 1546.⁷ The mastersongs must here be left out of consideration as they appeared in print neither in the edition of Sachs's works nor in separate prints. The only possible connection then must be between the Schwank of Sachs and the prose fable of Luther. As the version of Sachs appeared in 1528 and that by Luther in 1530 it is evident that if one was influenced by the other Luther must have been in this case the recipient.

Luther was not in correspondence nor apparently in close touch with Sachs so he could hardly have had access to his manuscript. The first volume of Sachs's printed works appeared in 1558 so this must be left out of consideration. There was, however, another source of contact, the special printing of single poems. Many of Sachs's shorter poems

⁶ Steinhöwel Aesop. Ed. Oesterley, p. 82.

⁷ Sämtliche Fabeln und Schwänke von Hans Sachs. Ed. by E. Goetze. Neudrucke Vol. 1, No. 3; Vol. 3, No. 2; Vol. 4, No. 329.

thus attained a wider circulation and the general list of his writings appearing in the first edition of his works shows that this poem was one of the first to be so treated.⁸

The question now arises as to what probability there was that Luther should know this version. "Die Witttembergisch Nachtigall" had appeared in 1523, six years after Luther's first public appearance in opposition to the sale of indulgences and two years after the Diet of Worms. Its success was instantaneous and it obtained a far larger audience than the pulpit could command. Having thus taken his stand definitely on the side of the Reformation, Sachs entered the field still more aggressively in the following year. In the first of a series of dialogues he allows a shoemaker who is an adherent of the Reformation to argue with and worst a Catholic canon. Four of these dialogues were printed as pamphlets and attracted much attention.

Sachs's next attempt to aid the Reformation openly with his pen was to be his last. Osiander, Protestant pastor in Nürnberg, had undertaken the publication of a series of pictures attacking the Papacy and obtained the aid of Sachs to furnish verses for the pictures. The print was entitled "Eine wunderliche Weissagung von dem Papsttum" and appeared early in 1527. It was a joy to the Lutherans and a torment to their opponents. Luther's opinion we have in his own words in a letter to Spalatin, April 29, 1527. "Ihr habt freilich das Büchlein zu Nürnberg ausgangen mit den Figuren wohl gesehen, darin des Papsttums ja nicht vergessen ist. Es ist mit dem Antichrist auf die Hefen kommen und Christus will sein ein Ende machen, desz sei Gott gelobt in Ewigkeit. Amen."⁹ It was not welcomed as eagerly by the Nürnberg Council which saw in it only occasion for increasing the already bitter attitude of the two parties and on March 6, 1527 issued a decree reprimanding Osiander and forbidding Sachs to write further for publication. For a time he was silent, but the Council seems to have meant this more as a warning than as a permanent injunction. At any rate scarce-

⁸ Goetze, *Neudrucke, Fabeln und Schwänke*, Vol. 1, p. 6 (note).

⁹ Quoted in Kawerau, "Hans Sachs und die Reformation," *Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte* Vol. 7, p. 70.

ly a year had elapsed before his next poem appeared in print and shortly after as the second poem to be so printed appeared the fable "Frosch und Maus." As these poems showed no polemical tendency the Council could plainly see that their warning had been heeded.

The Lutheran circle in Nürnberg would certainly hail with interest renewed literary activity on the part of the man who had suffered for championing the cause of their leader. With one of them at least Luther was in personal correspondence. This was Wenzel Link, an active worker in the Augustinian monastery which he won to Lutherism. It would not be surprising if this friend had kept Luther informed of the fortunes of his literary champion and also sent him the next productions of his pen especially as the fable in question has a moral teaching. It may even have stimulated his purpose to do something himself in this branch of literature.

But without internal evidence the conjecture of influence of one by the other would fall to the ground and examination of the two versions is necessary. Luther's fables as the manuscript shows were written with many corrections, filings and polishings. All the fables are brief, the first form of the one in question, number 3, containing the story in ten lines and the moral in six additional. Sachs extends his to 48 lines in rhyme. In the main story both have followed the Steinhöwel model closely, Sachs deviating more in details, as he often did from his source, and as the larger compass of his fable here demanded. The moral, "Hoist by his own petard", Steinhöwel expresses in one prosaic sentence devoid of any proverbs or figures of speech. Both Luther and Sachs use a wealth of proverbs in their writings and it is not surprising that they are found here to point the moral to this tale. It is interesting to note, however, that of the three proverbs found in Luther's manuscript version two are found in Sachs and one of these is by no means a common one.

Although both Sachs and Luther were interested in proverbs and proverbial phrases their common stock was very different. Luther made a collection of proverbs familiar to him.¹⁰ Of the 489 proverbs here contained only 25 are found

¹⁰ *Luthers Sprichwörtersammlung*. Ed. By E. Thiele, Weimar 1900.

in the fables, Schwänke and Shrovetide plays of Sachs, and when found only the general idea is the same. Practical similarity of words is scarcely found at all. Although Luther's collection does not exhaust the proverbs and popular expressions found in his writings, he must have picked them out as typical and appealing especially to him. In this connection it is worthy of note that the proverbs occurring in the fable "Von der maus und frosch" do not appear in his collection as they would have been likely to do if they had been such as readily occurred to his mind.¹¹

A comparison of the texts will bring out the points mentioned above. Unless otherwise stated the quotations from Luther are from the first manuscript version.

Steinhöwel	Sachs	Luther
Von der mus, frosch und wyer.	Fabel mit dem Frosch und der Mausz.	¹¹ Von der maus und frosch
Ain mus wäre gern über ain wasser gewesen	Ein Mausz bey eynem Wasser saz	¹² Vom frosch und der maus
	Gar geren sie hinüber was	Eine maus were gern über ein wasser gewest
und begeret raut und hilff von einem frosch (not found)	(not found)	Da bat sie einen frosch umb trewen rat
	Der was untrewer liste voll	Der frosch war hemisch
		¹³ Der frosch war ein Schalck
band den fuosz der mus an synen fuosz	Der band ein faden umb der Mause Schwantz	Binde deinen fusz an meinen
Als er mitten in das wasser kam, tunket sich der frosch und zoch di mus under sich und wolt sie ertrencken	der Frosch zu stund Sich nieder ducket bisz zu grund Und zog die Mausz fast undter sich, Die Mausz die schrey: Frosch wilt du mich Ertrencken?	Da sie aber aufs wasser kamen, tauchet der frosch hinuntern und wolt die maus ertrencken.
Do des die ellend mus empfand, widerstund sy	Da kam ein Storch geflogen hoch	Inn dem aber die maus sich weret und erbeit,

¹¹ E. Schröder in *Anzeiger für deutsches Altertum* 1901, Vol. 27, p. 101 ff., conjectures that Luther was trying to present a rival collection of proverbs to Agricola's, as explanation of the absence of many common ones.

¹² Manuscript.

¹³ Printed edition.

dem frosch nach ieren krefften: in dem kompt ein wy geflogen und nimpt die mit synen klawen und den hangenden frosch mit ihr und asz sie baide	Und sach die Mausz im Wasser schweben. zeucht den frosch auch sie eben Und fürt sie mit im in sein nest Mit sampt den Frosch den er nicht west	fleuget ein Weyh daher und erhasschet die maus, Er schosz herab, er griff mit eraus und frisset sie alle beide
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The parallel passages above show plainly that Steinhöwel was the original source for the two later writers. In Luther's only departure from Steinhöwel a precedent is found in Sachs. The passages that follow are the moral teachings of the fable and show striking similarities between Luther and Sachs in their divergence from Steinhöwel.

Steinhöwel	Sachs	Luther
Also beschicht auch denen, die ander lüt veruntrüw- en wellent und versprech- ent hilff und begeren ze schedigen, das in oft gel- yche bütt würt	So traff die untrew iren Herrn (Not found in Steinhöwel)	Doch schlegt untrew all- zeit yhren herren
	Ich will dir zalen Dein untrew und dein <i>falsche</i> dück Überflüssig auff deinen rück Und must mir gelten mit der hewt Als du die Mausz hast veruntrewt (Not found in Steinhöwel)	und mus der <i>falsche</i> frosch ynn seiner untrew mit der maus verderben
(Not found)	Warumb sachst du nit basz für dich Warhaffte trew ist gar miszlich	Sihe fur dich trew ist misslich

The last sentence quoted above is the most striking of the similarities here shown as it is a proverb rarely met with in German literature. It is first found in slightly different wording in Brant's "Narrenschiff":

Traw yedem wol, lûg doch für dich,
dann worlich, truw ist yetz miszlich.¹⁴

Sachs uses it in the schwank in question but employs a different verb in the first member. Once more Sachs uses

¹⁴ Ed. by Zarncke, Leipzig 1854. 69, 22.

it in a Schwank written on December 11, 1557,¹⁵ illustrating here his tendency to make use of a favorite phrase more than once. Luther uses the same words as Sachs in a more condensed form. We also come across it again in Luther's writings in the exposition of the tenth commandment from the 20th chapter of Exodus. "Denn die Liebe helt das best vom nehesten, Aber gleichwol sihe dich für, Trew is mislich."¹⁶ This commentary was written in 1529 the year after the appearance of Sachs's fable and the year before Luther prepared his brief collection. Although this phrase is found recorded in such collections of proverbs as Wander, Körte and Schottelius it was never widely employed and could scarcely be called common literary property.¹⁷

In the parallel columns quoted above practically the entire version as found in Steinhöwel and Luther has been given. Only those passages from Sachs's longer version which show similarities have been quoted. Luther uses one proverb not found in either Sachs or Steinhöwel. In every other important variation from Steinhöwel, the same variation is found in Sachs. Of significance too is the fact that the most striking similarity with the latter version, the proverb just treated, was written on the margin of the manuscript showing that it was an addition from the very first form.

To sum up: Luther's version of the fable appeared two years after the fable by Sachs. Luther could easily have become acquainted with this in its separately printed form and it was very natural that friends in Nürnberg should send him copies of poems produced by a man who had shortly before done such signal service for the Reformation and was still suffering under the bann of the authorities for this activity. Internal examination shows that deviation from

¹⁵ Goetze, *Fabeln und Schwänke*, Vol. I, No. 186, ll. 109-110.

¹⁶ *Luthers Schriften*, Vol. 4. Jena 1560. 2nd Ed. p. 530^b.

¹⁷ The fact that this proverb is found in Agricola together with the other proverbs used in this fable by Luther admits the possibility of his having drawn from the "Sprichwörtersammlung." This is offset however by his well-known antipathy to Agricola and also by the fact that of the 26 proverbs used by him in his other fables only 2 are found in Agricola.

the original source, Steinhöwel, is largely in line with the version by Sachs. It is of course necessary to be cautious in any search for direct sources and in this case we must allow the possibility that the same expressions occurred to the two writers to illustrate the same moral truth. If so, it is in itself a most interesting case of literary and mental parallelism. It is certainly no more unreasonable to assume the possibility that aside from the Steinhöwel version, Luther also knew Sachs's fable "Frosch und Maus" in its separately printed form, the influence of Sachs appearing on the popular didactic side.

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